Carrying On A Tradition

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Through the wonders of E-mail, I have just seen the inaugural article of this series set in print. I was delighted to see that the column was entitled "The Dance" because, in my earliest memories, we always went to 'the dance.' We didn't go to 'the square dance' or 'the hoedown.' We just went to 'the dance,' and we danced whatever was being danced that night.

There is no way to tell you about traditional dancing and dance history unless we talk about a lot more than just 'traditional' square dancing. The tide of this column is broad enough that we can explore a lot of areas about 'the dance.'

A lot of us on today's dance floors look old. I'll bet many of us had similar experiences when we were first introduced to dancing. For most of us over fifty, the experience started early in elementary school. We danced to simple children's dances to tunes we usually sang.

Do any of you remember "Pop Goes the Weasel"? We stood in groups of three. The three children joined hands, with one child facing out of the group. The out-facer was the leader. As we sang the song, the trios ran or skipped around the room or schoolyard in a big circle while singing:

"Penny for a spool of thread,
Penny for the needle.
That's the way the money goes,
Pop! goes the weasel."

On the word 'pop,' the leading child dropped handholds with the other children and quickly squatted to the floor. The trailing pair swept their joined hands over the top of this child and quickly ran forward to the next squatter in the big circle. Then the squatters jumped up and, without turning around, grabbed hands with the new pair behind him or her. This routine was repeated with additional verses. It was great fun and great exercise. We learned to play together, sing together, and work as a team. Everyone had to cooperate, or the dance would fall apart. This dance turned out to be an important set of lessons for later in life.

Did you ever wonder why the weasel went 'pop'? One version of the story comes from one of the verses we sang as we danced:

"Around and 'round the cobbler's bench,
The monkey chased the weasel.
The monkey thought 'twas all in fun,
Pop! goes the weasel."

In this verse, the 'weasel' was a nickname for a tall hat that men wore during the 1800s. On windy days these hats often blew off and rolled merrily down the street. Small boys waited

patiently on the streets and chased down the rolling hats. They were the "monkeys" in the song. After returning the hat to the owner, the boy received a reward. The man put the hat back onto his head and set it down solidly by patting or 'popping' the top with his hand.

I learned dozens of these simple dances during my first three years of elementary school. They were all role-playing games, many with songs and lyrics that told historical stories hundreds of years old. Some of the stories were about sad events. In the dance "London Bridge", one pair of children formed a two-handed arch, while the rest of the children created a big circle and ducked through the archway one by one while singing:

"London Bridge is falling down,
falling down, falling down.
London Bridge is falling down, my
fair lady."

Now comes the sad story behind that dance. The arch represents the London Bridge of ancient times. This bridge was always falling apart every few years due to floods, poor materials, and the massive amount of traffic it was expected to carry even in old times. When they rebuilt the foundations for this bridge, the ancient Londoners believed the bridge would last longer if a virgin was sacrificed and placed in one of the foundations.

It's gruesome, and I refrain from telling this story to young children, yet it's an example of how history is preserved in song and dance long after the event.

Only a few of these dances told sad stories. Many of the dances taught youngsters the skills that they needed. The difference between right and left. How to move forward and back, or side to side, without falling. How to walk, skip, and run in time to the music. These skills may seem simple to us now, yet they formed the basis for skills used later in sports and professions.

Nowadays, many schools have eliminated dancing from their curriculum. In other schools, the only place a teacher can have for dancing is his or her crowded classroom. Even under these restrictions, I often find that when I conduct a dance party for an elementary school or P.T.A., most children already know how to do "The Hokey Pokey" and "The Birdie Dance." Sometimes, they know other dances as well. I usually start by doing the dances they already know. Then, depending on the age of the children, I can introduce them to other great dances and great stories of the past.